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ABSTRACT

Teachers and administrators are often at a loss as to where they should turn for practical, down-to-earth assistance in the area of parent conferencing. The counselor is in a position to provide such assistance, and several strategies are presented which are available to this mental health specialist. The counselor is provided with a working knowledge of a parent conferencing model which can be used to conduct staff development activities for teachers, administrators, and other school personnel. (Author)

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TRAINING TEACHERS FOR PARENT CONFERENCING: A NEW HORIZON FOR THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR

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Parent conferencing has not been a popular topic with either educational researchers or theoriticians. One does find occasional references to the topic by persons in the areas of school administration, curriculum development, program evaluation, and supervision, but the treatment of parent conferencing is usually secondary to some other issue or topic. When parent conferencing does attract the attention of educators, they tend to focus on the informational aspects of conferencing rather than the affective or feeling aspect of the interaction with parents. Some authorities have gone so far as to acknowledge the importance of the feeling aspect of conferencing, but in practice, their writing almost invariably emphasizes the informational aspect of conferencing. With this state of affairs, teachers and administrators are often at a loss as to where they should turn for practical, down-to-earth assistance with the area of parent conferencing.

When one works with teachers in a warm, relaxed atmosphere, the vast majority of them are willing to acknowledge the inadequacy of their conferencing skills. Specifically, teachers tend to perceive of themselves as being weakest in what the present authors have chosen to call problem-oriented

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parent conferences. The term, "problem-oriented conference," is difficult to define in a precise, scientific fashion, but the following statement should suffice to give the reader a feel for what is implied: By "problem-oriented conference" we mean those interactions between teacher and parent(s) which deal with some perceived problem and/or inadequacy in the behavior of the child or the teacher. Such conferences are almost always emotionally charged since the interaction centers around perceived problems, weaknesses, deficits, and/or inadequacies in the behavior of the child or teacher. The vast majority of the teachers encountered in staff development activities feel that they were never adequately trained for handling this kind of interaction with parents.

By and large, teachers report that neither their academic training nor their student teaching experience provided an adequate emphasis on parent conferencing. About the only common denominator that one finds in the training programs of teachers is that they have been told to "Say something nice about the student at the start of the conference." Beyond this point, however, there is a great deal of divergence in how teachers describe their conferencing styles. In informal group interaction and role playing activities one finds a concern with "standing up to parents" and forcing them to see that they must take the initiative and accept responsibility for changing their child's behavior at school. Another

common approach might be characterized as "looking for the cause of the problem(s)" where the teacher questions the parent(s) about the child's home life and early educational experiences. With this approach, the teacher collects information about the child and his/her family with the idea of making suggestions concerning how the home situation can be changed to improve the child's learning and/or behavior at school. Still another variation in the conferencing approach used by teachers might be described as "How is my approach working?" in that the teacher approaches the parent for feedback concerning the child's reactions to his/her instructional approach and suggestions as to what else can be done to help. Finally, one gets a feel for an approach which might be entitled "referral for expert opinion" since the teacher acknowledges that he/she does not have the answer about how to help the child. In this case, the referral suggested by the teacher might involve working with school personnel such as the counselor, school psychologist, or social worker or going outside the school system to a psychiatrist, clinical psychologist, or some other type of specialist.

The different approaches to conferencing described above represent strategies which teachers have evolved for themselves on a "hit and miss" basis or modeled from talking with other teachers and administrators. When working together in groups, teachers find that they can learn a great deal from

each other when they share techniques which they find effective in conferencing. This approach has a great deal to offer and should be part of any kind of staff development activities for teachers. However, this type of sharing approach is not entirely satisfactory since it does not provide teachers with an adequate basis for planning, organizing, implementing and evaluating their conferencing skills on a systematic basis. Yet another weakness in the mutual sharing approach is that it does not provide teachers with an emotional framework which enables them to cope with the intense feelings which can develop in the course of problem-oriented conferences. That is, teachers tend to be ill-equipped to cope with either their own emotional reactions to criticism or the intense feelings of anger, hostility, and defensiveness which are often expressed by parents during problem-oriented conferences.

HOW THE COUNSELOR CAN HELP

As the building mental health specialist, the counselor is in a unique position to provide support for teachers and help them develop their conferencing skills. Several alternative strategies are available to the counselor who is genuinely concerned with facilitating communication between teachers and parents. One viable strategy consists of sitting in on parent conferences with teachers and modeling effective communication procedures. Another approach consists of working individually with teachers to help them plan and rehearse

effective communication procedures. Another approach consists of working individually with teachers to help them plan and rehearse effective conferencing skills when they sense that they are going to be involved in a particularly difficult encounter with parents. Still another approach consists of working with teachers who have encountered devistating experiences in conferencing and helping them process and work through their emotional trauma.

An alternative strategy is for the counselor to take a broader perspective and become involved in staff development activites for teachers. Of course, staff development activities are not incompatible with the helping strategies noted above; quite the opposite is true, in fact. The counselor who shows an interest in teachers by discussing conferencing with them, processing emotional hurts, and modeling effective conferencing procedures is the kind of person with whom teachers will be willing to work in staff development activities. Several different approaches may be used to introduce staff development activities in the area of parent conferencing, but any given approach is most likely to prove successful when the counselor is perceived of as being the kind of person who has his/her "own act together" in the area of parent conferencing.

A THREE STAGE MODEL

The purpose of this paper is to provide counselors with a working knowledge of a parent conferencing model which they

can use to conduct staff development activities for teachers, administrators, and other school personnel. As noted earlier, the focus of the model is on problem-oriented conferences since these are the type of interactions which teachers find most difficult and most frequently request assistance with. Yet, all of the material in the model is equally applicable to routine conferences concerned with reporting routine progress to parents. Teachers who have been trained in the use of the model report that their effectiveness in conducting normal, developmental conferences improves appreciably along with their handling of problem-oriented conferences.

The three stages included in the model are Planning and Organization, Implementation, and Self-Evaluation. For purposes of clarity and organization, the text of the paper is divided into major sections with these captions as capitalized side headings. The different steps involved at each stage are side headings to organize the material in each major section. With this type of organization, the counselor is in a position to locate material quickly or brush up on specific sections without extensive searching through the text. Table 1 provides a summary of the entire conferencing model which makes an excellent overhead to use with teachers while previewing the model. In addition, Appendix A is a complete overview of the model which shows the questions used to help teachers plan their conferences.

TABLE 1

A THREE-STAGE MODEL FOR PARENT CONFERENCING

OVERVIEW OF THE MODEL:

STAGE I: ORGANIZATION AND PLANNING

1. Specify the problem area(s).
2. Organize your information.
3. Specify your conference objectives.
4. Decide on your conference strategy.
5. Rehearse your conferencing techniques.

STAGE II: CONFERENCING

STAGE III: SELF-EVALUATION

1. Process evaluation
2. Product evaluation

PLANNING AND ORGANIZATION

The first stage of the model, Planning and Organization, involves five steps which are concerned with delineating the student's difficulties in the school setting, selecting information which should be presented to the parents, evaluating this information, and deciding how to go about presenting this information to the parents. Specifically, the five steps involved in the Planning and Organization stage of the model are as follows: 1) Specify the problem area(s); 2) Organize your information; 3) Define your conference objectives; 4) Decide on your conference strategy; and 5) Rehearse your conferencing techniques. The first three steps listed above are essentially cognitive in the sense that they involve the informational aspects of conferencing. Here the emphasis is on helping the teacher prepare for the conference by getting together information in a form which will be intelligible and convincing to the parents. In contrast, the fourth and fifth steps are concerned with the feeling aspects of parent conferencing. Thus, the present model of parent conferencing is concerned with helping teachers plan, organize, and rehearse for both affective and informational aspects of conferencing.

Specifying the Problem(s)

The first step, Specifying the Problem(s), is concerned with helping the teacher learn to identify specific behaviors

and avoid global statements which are difficult to substantiate. Here the thrust of the teacher's efforts should be on determining the student's achievement in basic skill areas and/or on specifying behaviors which interfere with learning. At this step, teachers are encouraged to concentrate on the following question: What behaviors need to be brought to the attention of the parents? This question is phrased in behavioral terms since experiences in conducting workshops with teachers indicate that they tend to describe a child's behavior in global terms when conferencing with parents. Analysis of tape recordings of parent conferences indicates that statements such as the following are commonplace:

"Johnny disrupts the class."

"Leonard starts fights with other boys."

"Mary just won't do her work."

"Dessie causes trouble all the time."

"Bill never turns in his homework."

"Rex is a sneaky kid."

"Ron always tries to boss other children around."

Statements such as these are not only emotionally laden for parents, but nonproductive in the sense that they are too general to be helpful in educational planning.

Several alternative approaches can be used to help teachers develop more specific descriptions of a child's behavior in the school setting. The more traditional approach is evident in the work of Froehlich and Hoyt (1974, pp. 1-58)

who concentrate on helping teachers learn to write anecdotal records and prepare behavior rating scales. A different approach is evident in the work of Stephens (1976, pp. 77-158) and Cooper (1974, pp. 1-58) who prefer to rely almost exclusively on direct, behavioral observation; criterion-referenced skill tests; and student products. The approach advocated by Kroth and Simpson (1977, pp. 79-101) differs substantially from those discussed above in the sense that it is oriented specifically to parent conferencing and covers a wide range of information which ranges from notes in the cumulative record through norm-referenced test data, anecdotal records, and behavioral observations. The experiences of the present writers suggest that both teachers and parents find the kind of information described by Stephens (1976) and Cooper (1974) most helpful. However, conselors working with teachers in the area of parent conferencing are urged to explore the different approaches and select the ones which are most congruent with their own personal style. A detailed description of the procedures described above is beyond the scope of the present paper; however, a brief description of those procedures which have worked best for the authors along with a few examples should indicate how the training procedures are implemented.

The general question, What behaviors need to be brought to the attention of the parents? can be expanded into two, more specific questions which are used to help teachers

refine their descriptions of the behaviors which interfere with classroom learning. The starting point for the development of these questions was Stephen's (1976, pp. 12-23) description of the two types of behaviors which interfere with the acquisition of academic and social skills. According to Stephens, handicapping behaviors can be conceptualized as deficits in rate of behavior (both over-emission and under-emission) and weak control of behavior. Several attempts were made to show teachers how to use these concepts, but it proved necessary to transpose them into a somewhat different form. The following two questions have proven most useful in helping teachers delineate and describe the classroom behaviors which interfere with learning: What behaviors do you feel the student should develop? and What behaviors do you feel should be eliminated? Both of these questions are phrased so that it is clear that an element of teacher judgment is involved. When questions are stated in this fashion ("you feel") there is an acknowledgement that the teacher's professional judgement is involved and that he/she has an obligation to explain the reasons why any behavior needs to be developed or eliminated.

In response to the first question, What behaviors do you feel the student should develop?, the teacher might decide that he/she feels that Johnny should develop the following behaviors: remain in his seat unless excused by the teacher,

master the Dolch sight vocabulary, and learn the short vowel sounds. For the second question, Johnny's teacher might feel that the following behaviors should be eliminated: tripping other children who pass his desk, throwing objects at other children, talking without permission, hitting other children, scribbling on his math papers, and making animal noises during class. When behaviors such as those listed above for the second question are delineated and measured, the teacher is then in a good position to show the parents how Johnny disrupts the class. The situation seems to hold true for the behaviors specified for the first question, i.e., those to be developed.

Organizing Information

The second step, Organizing Information, is concerned with collecting and selecting information which can be used to show the parents that their child actually has a certain kind of difficulty in school. Here the teacher is encouraged to evaluate his/her evidence so that statements to the parents can be presented with an appropriate degree of certainty. The following question is used to help teachers collect and organize the information they plan to present to parents during the conference: What evidence do you have to show the parents that this is a problem area? This question follows naturally from the two questions described earlier for Step One. That is, teachers are encouraged to collect evidence so they can show parents why they feel it is necessary to develop

and/or eliminate the behaviors that they are going to call to the parent's attention. For purposes of effective communication, it is most important that the teachers are able to examine their evidence and determine just how certain they are that a problem exists in some given area.

In Johnny's case, for example, what evidence does the teacher have to indicate that hitting other children is a problem area which needs to be corrected? If the teacher makes a vague, global statement such as, "Johnny is always hitting other children." one of the parents is likely to say something like, "How do you know? Did you see him?" When this happens, teachers often become upset and angry because they feel their professional competence is being questioned. The question stated above encourages teachers to evaluate their evidence before going into a conference and to exercise care in how they phrase their statements to parents. If the teacher indicates his/her concern about Johnny's hitting other children and presents a concrete description of the frequency of this behavior, then the parents are much more likely to acknowledge the existence of a problem and pursue relevant details in a more objective manner. For example, Johnny's teacher might present the following pattern of evidence to the parent: the teacher has observed Johnny strike students on seven different occasions during the last two weeks, four times in the classroom, two times on the playground, and once in the restroom; seven different students

(four girls and three boys) have also reported being hit by Johnny during the past two weeks; and three teachers reported seeing Johnny hit other children on the playground. The parents may well have questions about the circumstances of Johnny's hitting other children, but they are much less likely to question the existence of a problem when information is presented in this fashion.

Teachers are also encouraged to think about the question, What have you done to help solve the problem? when they are collecting information to share with the parents. In one form or another, parents often get around to asking the teacher this question. Consideration of this question not only helps teachers improve their conferencing, but also encourages them to identify intervention strategies and try them with students before contacting the parents for a conference. Experience with teachers suggests that this question encourages teachers to assume some responsibility for changes in the child's behavior rather than leaving all of the responsibility with the parents. When both the parents and teacher can acknowledge that their efforts have not been entirely successful, then they can concentrate on pooling their resources to find strategies for solving the problem which interferes with learning.

Specifying Objectives

The third step, Specifying Objectives, involves describing specific changes which the teacher feels should

occur in the student's behavior. To a substantial degree, the conference objectives formulated at this step are closely related to the behaviors sepcified at the first step of the model. However, they are not usually the same because the teacher will be soliciting the cooperation of the parents and discussing intervention strategies which he/she plans to implement. Here the general question, What are your objectives for the conference? serves as the focal point for the teacher's planning activities, but three more specific questions are also necessary. The first question, What changes in the student's behavior should you concentrate on producing? does not always get the same response as the two questions fromulated to help the teacher identify the behaviors to be developed and/or eliminated. For example, the teacher may decide that it is not wise to concentrate on all of the problem areas at one time and select some of the more critical areas on which to concentrate. Also, the teacher might decide that some of the problem areas can best be handled at school without involving the parents directly. Thus it can be seen that the teacher must use professional judgement in deciding which behaviors should be called to the attention of the parents, which should be handled at school, and which should be postponed for remediation at a latter time.

The second question, What would you like the parents to

do to help bring about the desired behaviors? has proven useful in helping teachers clarify what they want from parents. In workshops for teachers, this question serves as a focal point in encouraging teachers to decide on what kine of help they want from the parents. If teachers approach parents in this manner, then the conference is much more likely to evolve along the lines of constructive planning for the child than if the parents are simply presented with problems. Dicussions with parents indicate that they often feel upset, helpless, and angry with teachers when they are given descriptions of their child's learning and/or behavior problems without concrete suggestions as to how they can help. Here again, parents are more likely to react positively and become actively involved in working constructively with the teacher when they sense that the teacher is soliciting their help because he/she is deeply concerned about their child's education. This feeling stands in sharp contrast to negative feelings which are engendered when parents sense that the teacher is giving them a message which says in essence, "Your child has a problem, now what are you going to do about it?"

The final question, What are you, the teacher, willing to do to bring about the desired behavioral changes? serves to focus attention on the teacher's responsibility to remain actively involved in attempting to achieve the desired behavioral changes. Teachers who have participated in the

parent conferencing workshops find that most parents are appreciative of the fact that the teacher has taken the trouble to formulate a tentative plan for remedying their child's difficulties and are willing to take the time to share the plan with them. When parents feel at ease, they usually wish to discuss the teacher's plans and can frequently provide constructive information about their child which the teacher can use to improve his/her instructional strategies.

By way of review, the first three steps of the Planning and Organization stage (Specifying the Problem(s), Organizing Information, and Specifying Objectives) are all predominantly cognitive in the sense that they require the teacher to collect, organize, and evaluate information which is to be shared with parents. In contrast, the third and fourth steps of the Planning and Organization stage differ from the first three steps since they are mainly concerned with the quality of the emotional interaction between the teacher and parents. At this point, then, the focus of the model shifts rather abruptly from the informational to the affective aspect of conferencing. In actual practice this shift is not nearly so abrupt as one might think from studying the model. As with all models, however, it is necessary to separate, abstract, and sequence behaviors in some manner so they can be described and demonstrated. When one attains fluency with the conferencing model, the separate steps

gradually integrate and fuse themselves into a meaningful whole.

Deciding on a Conference Strategy

The fourth step, Deciding on a Conference Strategy, involves trying to anticipate how the parents will behave during the conference. If the teacher can get some idea as to how the parents are likely to behave during the conference, then the teacher is in a position to work with his/her own emotions in preparing for the conference. Parents show a wide range of reactions when they are presented with difficulties which their children are encountering in school. At least three of these reactions are particularly difficult for teachers to cope with. By and large, teachers report that it is most difficult for them to encounter the form of interaction which the authors have chosen to call "direct personal attack;" but, "covert subversion" and "denial" are also difficult for many teachers to manage.

Teachers find "direct personal attack" particularly disconcerting because it not only involves intense anger and denigration of the teacher's professional competence, but also contains some type of threat (in direct or indirect form) to the teacher's job or professional reputation. Statements such as:

"You have Arnold so upset he can't sleep!"

"You've got my son to the point where he hates school!"

"We can't let you do this to John!"

are examples of "active personal attack" if one can use his/her imagination to fill in the voice tone, inflection, and non-verbal behaviors which typically go with such statements. A teacher must be extremely secure in his/her personal and professional development before he/she can handle such statements without experiencing intense threat. Most teachers report that they typically respond to such statements by becoming either terrified and overwhelmed or angry and aggressive.

The second type of parent reaction, "covert subversion," involves a more subtle form of attack on the teacher which falls within socially acceptable bounds but can, nevertheless, be extremely devistating. The essential characteristic of "covert subversion" is that it involves subtly undermining the teacher's self-confidence and professional integrity. The following are statements which illustrate "covert subversion:"

> "Miss Woody (former teacher) said it would take a sepcial kind of teacher to understand our Albert and work with him."
>
> "The psychologist said it would take a strong, male figure to relate to Glen." (Said to soft-spoken male teacher of small stature.)
>
> "We were hoping that Donnie would get a teacher who would be patient with him."

"We've always known that it takes a strong person to discipline Richard."

"Tony won't mind anyone he doesn't respect."

Close examination of these statements will show that they all involve "covert subversion" in the sense that they imply some form of personal and/or professional inadequacy on the part the teacher.

A further type of parental reaction which proves difficult for teachers is what the authors have chosen to label "denial." The common denominator for the "denial" reaction is that the parents refuse to acknowledge the existence of any type of difficulty or problem. Some of the common types of statements which indicate a "denial" reaction are as follows:

"A lot of kids his age are the same way."

"He'll grow out of it."

"Its just a stage she's going through."

"Most kids go through a stage like this."

"I was the same way when I was a kid."

"You can make too much out of some little thing."

Here again, careful scrutiny of these statements will indicate that they all contain a message for the teacher. In one form or another, these statements carry a message which says to the teacher that she/he is out of perspective and over-reacting to a normal set of behaviors.

These three types of parent reactions differ substantially in terms of emotional significance they hold for teachers, but

the strategy is generally quite similar in all three cases. That is, the focus of the conference is shifted from discussing the difficulties/problems which the child is encountering in school to an attack on the personal and/or professional adequacy of the teacher. The emotional intensity of this attack as well as the degree of subtlety involved, and the openness with which it is conducted varies with the parents' reaction; but the essential strategy is still the same--shifting from the child's behavior to the teacher's adequacy.

Some questions have been devised to help teachers organize their thinking and prepare themselves emotionally by anticipating how the parents are likely to respond during the conference. The most useful question for this activity has been the following: How do you think the parents will behave during the conference? There are several sources that teachers can use to get the information necessary to provide a plausible answer to this question. For example, the teacher can go back and think about the content of telephone conversations with the parents, notes exchanged with them, or incidental conversations with them at PTA meetings or other school functions. If the teacher analyzes these interactions for their emotional tone, then useful information can usually be obtained. Discussions with other teacher who have had the child (or other members of the family) in the their classes is an excellent source of information about how the parents

are likely to react during the conference. Similarly, conversations with the principal and school counselor are also useful sources of information about how the parents are likely to behave during the conference.

Even though the question, How do you think the parents will behave during the conference?, is the focal point at this step of conference planning, there are several other questions which have also proven useful for teachers using the model. The question, How much information do the parents already have about their child's school difficulties/problems?, is often a critical one in trying to anticipate how parents will react during the conference. For example, parents will usually react differently when they are presented with a problem for the first time than if it has been called to their attention by previous teachers and discussed with them in detail. The conferencing strategy should also take into account the extent to which the teacher has been in contact with the parents by telephone or written notes to keep them informed about the child's progress. Parents usually take a dim view of conferences where they are suddenly told that their child is now having some major difficulty/problem at school. Under these circumstances, the parents usually react by saying something to the effect of, "Why haven't I been told about this before?" If the child's difficulty/problem is one of long-term duration, then it is important

to know how other teachers have gone about the task of calling their concerns to the attention of the parents.

Another question has proven useful in planning the strategy which the teacher should use in conferencing with parents. This question is phrased as follows: How do you think the parents feel about the conference? This question involves an intangible aspect of conferencing but is, nevertheless, extremely important. Coming to the school for a problem-oriented conference can evoke a wide range of emotional reactions on the part of parents. Such reactions can vary from feelings of intense anger and hostility about the teacher's audacity in questioning the child's adequacy, through genuine feelings of concern which are focused on mutual discussion and problem solving, all the way through to intense feelings of fear, apprehension, and insecurity. The quality of the parents' emotional reaction to the conference is more difficult to anticipate than either the amount of information they have about what is to be discussed during the conference or the behavioral pattern they are likely to bring to the conference. Yet, the teacher's ability to anticipate the quality of the parents' emotional reaction to the conference or evaluate it during the process of conferencing itself is probably one of the factors which is most critical (if not the most critical) to the success of the conference.

The framework discussed above gives a feeling for the kinds of considerations which are involved in Deciding on a Conference Strategy. Even though a wide range of concerns have been covered, the reader will be aware that the authors have not yet gone into delineating the different conferencing strategies and showing how they can be used. This kind of description is not only difficult and exhaustive, but also well beyond the scope of the present endeavor. Instead, a more practical approach in working with teachers seems to involve outlining the different variables which enter into developing conferencing strategies and allowing teachers to rely on their own expriences to synthesize them into a meaningful whole. Experiences in working with teachers suggests that several variables are important in formulating a conference strategy. These variables are described and illustrated in the following paragraphs.

First the type of approach used in the initial contact with the parents is an important aspect of a conferencing strategy. The type of approach can vary from eliciting feelings or requesting information from the parents through exchanging amenities and then immediately launching into providing information for the parents. Examples of eliciting feelings from the parents would be opening questions such as "How do you feel about Ted's progress in arithmetic this year?" or "How do you feel about the approach I'm using with

Ted?" These kinds of questions are especially appropriate for parents who have strong negative feelings toward the teacher. When this type of approach is used it enables the parents to get into their negative feelings immediately so they can be talked out (catharted) and processed with the teacher. Questions of this kind indicate to the parents that the teacher is willing to acknowledge their feelings and cope with intense emotions during the conference. In other words, "Its okay to feel during our conference." By and large, most teachers are emotionally prepared to handle the intense feelings which may be unleashed when such questions are used. However, techniques appropriate for dealing with intense feelings are presented, discussed and illustrated in the next step of the model.

Another kind of approach involves <u>requesting information</u> from the parents about their observations of the child. This approach has the effect of showing the parents that the teacher is maintaining an open mind about their child and is sincerely interested in any information they can provide. The following questions are illustrative of those that can be used to request information about a child:

"How does Tony seem to be reacting to his new reading group?"

"How does Ted feel about having his seat changed?"

"What kind of activities does Mark enjoy most at home?"

"What kind of friends does John have in the neighborhood?" These kinds of questions are designed to gain information that the teacher can use to plan more effectively for the child. Such questions represent a relatively safe approach to opening a conference when the teacher has very little information about how the parents are likely to react during the conference.

Even within the confines of providing information, there is still a wide range of approaches the teacher can use in initiating the conference. There is a great deal of difference between saying "Paul is just hopeless in reading." and "I'd like to share some of the concerns I have about Paul's progress in reading." Quite frankly, there is some question as to whether a conference should even be opened by launching into a direct statement of information unless the teacher already knows the parents and has established a good working relationship with them. Even here, there is probably some wisdom in following the traditional form of advice in "saying something nice" before getting down to a detailed discussion of the difficulties that need to be worked on. A statement like, "Rick is behaving much better in the classroom, but we're still working on his fighting at recess" shows that the teacher is aware of at least some progress and does not see the child as being all bad.

Another variable of concern in deciding on a conference strategy is pacing. Pacing is concerned with the rate at

which the conference is encouraged to move. In routine, developmental conferencing, it is possible for the teacher to move along and introduce new material or ideas at a fairly rapid rate. As a rule, however, the pace must be slowed down considerably when the teacher is introducing material which elicits strong feelings from the parents. If the teacher anticipates that strong feelings will be involved in his/her interactions with the parents, then the conference should be planned so that it proceeds at a slower pace. When emotionally-laden material is being discussed it is critical that parents be allowed adequate time to express their feelings and process them through with the teacher. Given this situation, teachers are usually able to cover less material in conferences where emotionally-charged information is being treated.

One can identify several other variables which are important from the standpoint of deciding on a conference strategy. Among these variables are the sequencing of concerns and time allocation as well as more general features of the family itself such as the socio-economic status, cultural level, ethnic background, and the quality of the relationship between the parents. The sequencing of concerns involves deciding in what order the teacher's concerns will be shared with the parents. When the amount of time is limited, it is often necessary to decide which concerns will

be discussed with the parents during the initial conference and which ones will be delayed until later, after an attitude of mutual trust and concern has been developed. Time allocation is almost always a real concern in parent conferencing but it has not proven to be an overwhelming obstacle for those teachers who are truly committed to improving their communication with parents. For example, when teachers anticipate an emotionally-laden conference they can schedule it at the end of the school day and arrange their schedule so that adequate time is available for interaction with the parents. Similarly, teachers can schedule additional meetings with parents if all of the mutual concerns are not resolved at the end of their first meetings.

Rehearsing Conferencing Techniques

In contrast to earlier steps, Rehearsing Conferencing Techniques, the fifth step of the Planning and Organization stage, requires that teachers be familiarized with a set of helping skills which enables them to attend to feelings expressed by the parents and work through their defensiveness. Several different types of helping/counseling skills have been presented to teachers during training sessions. However, experiences in working with several hundred teachers show that the helping skills described in Carkhuff's (1973) "tell-show-do" model are the ones which teachers learn most quickly, enjoy most, and find most useful in their conferencing with

parents. A detailed description of the Carkhuff model is beyond the scope of the present paper. However, it is worthwhile to note that Cakrhuff (1973) describes four, sequential helping skills, Attending, Responding, Initiating, and Communicating, in the second editon of this text, The art of helping. Experience in conducting workshops for teachers indicates that they can acheive a surprising degree of familiarity with these four counseling skills during an intensive one-day workshop if the "tell-show-do" approach is followed carefully. Extended practice is, of course, necessary if teachers are to acquire fluency with all four of the helping skills included in the Carkhuff model. Persons interested in implementing a workshop to familiarize teachers with the counseling skills described by Carkhuff can obtain a copy of the Trainer's guide for the art of helping (Carkhuff & Pierce, 1975). This training guide was designed for use with the second edition of The art of helping (Cakrhuff, 1973) which describes the four counseling skills mentioned above. The counseling skills are somewhat different in The art of helping III (Carkhuff, Pierce, & Cannon, 1977) which represents the most current version of Carkhuff's work.

Counselors who are interested in using the three stage model of parent conferencing should acquire copies of the appropriate works and obtain fluency with the Carkhuff model before they attempt to provide staff development

activities for teachers. A brief description of how the present authors train teachers to use the helping/counseling skills included in the Carkhuff model is, perhaps, in order if one assumes that the counselor who will be conducting the workshop is already familiar with this model. In this reagrd, the author's experience suggests that the first training session is best conducted within the framework of a six-hour day with three hours in the morning, a lunch break, and then three hours in the afternoon. Condensing the initial training sessions into a shorter time frame does not all the participants time to role play the exercises nor to acquire any of the counseling skills even at a minimal level.

The initial workshop activity is to divide the participants into groups of five or six with instructions to list the three most difficult aspects of parent conferencing on the sheets of newsprint which have been provided. These sheets of paper are then displayed so that all of the groups can share their results. After discussing these aspects, it becomes evident to the participants that nearly all of them view a conference where the focus is a student's problem (misbehavior, incomplete work, no homework and so on) as the most difficult. Following this activity, teachers are encouraged to discuss ways in which they have dealt with problem-oriented conferences. From these examples, they are lead into expressing their feelings during such types

of conferences and imagining what the parents may have been feeling. As this discussion progresses, the teachers begin to see how defensive feelings interferred with communication and to acknowledge that perhaps ways of dealing with the affective (feeling) domain in conferences would facilitate problem solution. That is, teachers begin to see that if either they or the parents are feeling defensive then angry behavior is generally what occurs, and if both parties are feeling angry, there can be little hope of talking about the child's problem in a rational manner.

At this point, the workshop leader discusses why counseling techniques can be helpful in a problem-oriented conference and briefly overviews the four helping skills from Carkhuff's (1973) model (Attending, Responding, Initiating and Communicating). The Affective Parent-Teacher Conferencing Diagram (Figure 1) shows the steps in the counseling strategy and provides a visual overview of how the counseling skills flow from initial Attending behaviors through devising a plan of action. Additionally, the diagram helps illustrate that each of the stages involves a decision. For instance, the teacher may choose to respond to a parent statement, or to focus on other things or make an evaluation of the parent's statement. If the teacher chooses the latter two alternatives, then the flow of counseling skills ceases.

For each stage of the Carkhuff model, the workshop

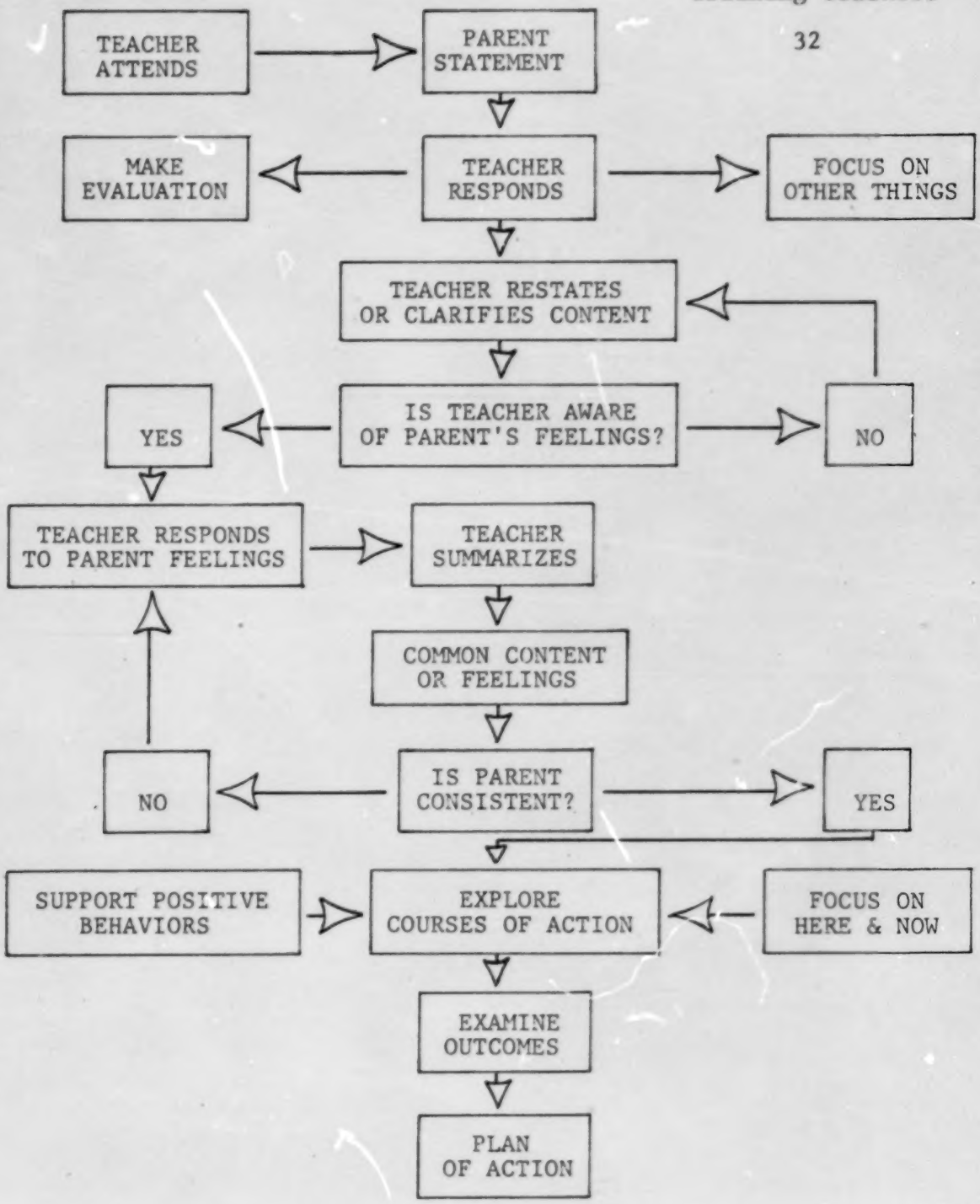

Figure 1. Affective parent-teacher conferencing diagram

leader utilizes the "tell-show-do" design. First the leader discusses or "tells" the purpose of the stage and what specific behaviors are to be encom ssed in the exercise; next she/he demonstrates or "shows" the behaviors; and finally the participants practice or "do" the behaviors in simulated role-play. Throughout the simulation exercieses, the participants are divided into triads for the activities. For each of the four exercises, one triad member role plays the parent, a second the teacher and the third observes the simulation. Through use of the Behavior Rating Sheet (Appendix B) each of the members rates the "teacher's" behavior and at the end of the simulation provides feedback to the "teacher."

The first exercise focuses on Attending Behaviors which seek to assure the parents that they are important enough to warrant the teacher's full attention. In addition to discussing Attending Behaviors, teachers are provided with a written explanation (Appendix C) of this dimension.

At the next stage, Responding, teachers practice verbalizing the cognitive (content) and affective (feeling) aspects of parent statements. By observing actual parent conferences, one can easily see that teachers generally react only to what the parent is saying without taking into consideration the feelings underlying parental statements. As indicated by Appendix D, the focus of activity is to call teachers' attention to the two types of responses

(Interchangeable and Subtractive) and to provide a model ("You feel_____ because _____.") for Interchangeable responses. Another way for a teacher to respond is by asking a question. As Appendix D indicates some types of questions seem to facilitate communication while others may make the parent feel defensive. Appendix E is an example of a worksheet which is used to help teachers differentiate between Interchangeable and Subtractive responses. Questions 3 and 4 usually generate the most discussion since the first responses are often viewed as Interchangeable since they contain the words "you feel." Experience indicates that it is difficult for teachers to understand that there is no "feeling word" (happy, sad, angry) associated with either response; i.e., the feeling associated with "its a hard decision" may be frustration, anger, helplessness or so forth. As suggested by Carkhuff, Pierce and Cannon (1977, p. 86) there are also different levels of feeling. For example if parents have been voicing statements indicating they are furious, they will feel misunderstood if the teacher's response is, "You seem a little upset." Participants are encouraged to generate additional words which would fit into the different levels of feeling words. Frequently at this point teachers begin to discuss the cultural and/or socio-economic aspects of "feeling words" and to cognize that some words which might be considered profanity in one culture may be perfectly

acceptable in another.

As the participants are practicing Responding in triads, the person role-playing the reacher is encouraged to utilize both Interchangeable and Subtractive responses so that the triad member who is role-playing the parent can share with the other members the differences in feeling which the two types of responses elicited. Most participants are surprised to find that there is a difference and that they feel "most listened to" when an Interchangeable response is used. Another frequently heard comment is, "I didn't realize I asked so many 'why' questions." or "It is hard to know how to answer when someone sask you 'Why?'--I felt as though I had to justify myself." Using these shared perceptions, the workshop leader is able to show teachers how they sometimes inadvertently make parents react angrily or defensively by asking why or by missing the point of what parents are expressing both cognitively and affectively.

While the behaviors associated with the first two stages (Attending and Responding) can be acquired with brief practice activities, Initiating and Communicating can only be introduced during the course of a one-day workshop. As Appendix F indicates, at the Initiating stage, the teacher attempts to relate common themes of the conference. This is done for two reasons; first to check out whether or not the teacher has accurately perceived what the parent has

been saying and feeling and secondly to reconcile differences in parents' verbalizations and behavior and/or seemingly contradictory statements. Since the whole rationale for utilizing helping skills is to help alleviate parents' defensiveness, the attitude of the teacher needs to convey a concern for his or her accuracy of perception rather than one of criticizing parents for inconsistencies. For example a teacher might say, "After I explained what Ken needs to do to bring up his English grades, I asked if you had any questions. You said 'no' but you had a rather puzzled look on your face. Is there something that isn't quite clear?" This type of statement helps teachers validate the accuracy of a perception ("You looked puzzled") and allows the parents to ask questions. On the other hand, if a teacher says, "Why didn't you ask questions after I explained Ken's English problems?" parents are forced to try to rationalize their stupidity in not asking questions.

The final stage of the Carkhuff model is Communicating (Appendix G). At this stage, the teacher and parents explore ways of solving the problem in order to arrive at a mutually satisfactory solution. Both parents and teacher try to generate as many alternatives as possible and to evaluate these alternatives as to possible outcomes. If for example the student is having difficulty in math, alternatives might include the purchase of a hand-held cal-

culator, the feasibility of tutoring, more structure from the parents in terms of required homework, alternative teaching strategies and so on. Teachers who have utilized these skills after their in-service training report that they have found it helpful to indicate to the parents what they (teachers) can do in the classroom and to ask parents to cooperate by helping the student at home. One teacher described this as an "I will if you will" strategy. In other words, the teacher might say, "I will spend five minutes a day helping Ken with his math if you will see that he does one practice paper each evening." This kind of "bargaining" helps to clearly delineate both responsibility and the cooperative effort necessary to remediate the problem.

As was indicated previously, Initiating and Communicating are skills that cannot be fully mastered in a one-day workshop. Based on teacher response, the best way to introduce these skills is to videotape a simulated parent conference and then have the workshop participants rate the "teacher" using the Initiating and Communicating behaviors indicated in Appendix B.

In order to help teachers integrate these skills, it has proven adviseable to schedule at least two, half-day sessions after teachers have been involved in parent conferences. During these follow-up sessions, the skills are reviewed through role play exercises and specific problems

and/or questions encountered during the actual conferences with parents are discussed.

By the time the teachers have gained a working familiarity with the four helping skills described earlier, they are then ready to focus on the basic questions used at this step of the model. Specifically, the basic question used here is "What would I say if . . .?". This question provides the teacher with an opportunity to anticipate the worst things the parents could say to them and go about thinking what would be an appropriate response. When a group of teachers are interacting in a workshop, they are usually able to come up with a forminable list of "put down" statements that have been used on them by parents. These statements provide an excellent opportunity for the participants to practice the helping skills which were discussed earlier.

CONFERENCING

During the second stage, Conferencing, the teacher tries to structure the conference so he/she accepts the parents' feelings and remains open to any alternatives which they might suggest. At this stage, the emphasis is on avoiding defensiveness on the part of the parents and teacher so that a mutually satisfactory plan can be developed. The helping skills mentioned earlier as well as the conferencing strategy are critical aspects of this overall emphasis.

By and large, the helping skills serve to ameliorate anxiety on the part of parents and enable them to relax their defenses. Conversely, the behavioral rehearsal mentioned earlier is part of a program of emotional education which the counselor can use to help teachers relax their own defenses and cope with anger, hostility, and frustration. Experiences in working with teachers suggests that extended contact is necessary if the model is to be implemented effectively. One of the best strategies is for the counselor to present a full-day workshop and then meet with participants on several occasions to provide support and follow-up. In follow-up sessions teachers have the opportunity to share their experiences and receive assistance and support from other participants as well as workshop leaders.

SELF-EVALUATION

The third stage of the model Self-Evaluation, is concerned with providing teachers with a framework which they can use to determine the effectiveness of their conferencing. The focus of the model is on self-evaluation by teachers themselves rather than on outside evaluation by administrative and supervisory personnel. Several considerations figured in the evolution of this aspect of the model. First, most teachers found that it is difficult for administrative and/or supervisory personnel to be available to sit in on conferences with them. Second, those teachers who had the experience of having

their administrator or supervisor join them in conferences often found that the presence of an additional person changed the quality of the interaction with the parents. For example, some parents tended to overreact to the presence of "someone higher up" in the conference by feeling that there must be something terribly wrong with their child. Other parents often got the impression that the teacher must be "in trouble" since someone was sitting in to see how they treated parents. Third, most teachers ultimately decided that they are most comfortable in first going over the conference themselves and then going to someone else for help with areas that seem weak to them.

A set of self-evaluation procedures was gradually developed and elaborated in the course of conducting workshops for different groups of teachers. Teachers were interested in both process and product evaluation, but a considerable amount of time was required for the workshop leaders to identify an evaluation procedure which they found satisfactory. The process aspect of the self-evaluation necessarily centers around helping teachers determine the extent to which they adhered to the conference objectives while interacting with the parents. In this regard, of course, the teachers were not encouraged to stick to the original conference objectives if new information relevant to the child's school difficulties became evident during the conference. When this occurred,

teachers were encouraged to evaluate any changes in objectives on the basis of whether or not they could be justified on the basis of new information obtained from the parent. The product aspect of the self-evaluation was concerned with helping teachers determine how successful they had been in attaining their conference objectives.

At the present time, the list of questions presented below are the ones used to help teachers organize and structure their self-evaluation activities. Three questions are used to assist teachers with process evaluation and four additional questions are used for product evaluation.

PROCESS EVALUATION

1. How well did you follow the conference plan as outlined at Stage 1?
2. To what extent were you able to anticipate the feelings and behaviors of the parents?
3. How effective was the conferencing strategy you developed?

PRODUCT EVALUATION

1. To what extent were you able to communicate your concerns (in each problem area) to the parents?
2. How successful were you in formulating a mutually satisfactory plan of action?
3. What did you learn about yourself as a person from analyzing your own feelings and behavior during the

conference?

4. How can you improve your conferencing from what you learned about yourself during your interaction with parents?

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Appendix A

QUESTIONS WHICH FACILITATE ORGANIZATION AND PLANNING

STAGE I: ORGANIZATION AND PLANNING

I. Specify the Problem Area(s)

A. What behaviors need to be brought to the attention of the parents?

1. What behaviors do you feel the student should develop?
2. What behaviors do you feel should be eliminated?

II. Organize Your Information

A. What evidence do you have to show the parents that this is a problem area?

B. What have you done to help solve the problem?

III. Specify Your Objectives

A. What are your objectives for the conference?

1. What changes in the student's behavior should you concentrate on producing?
2. What would you like the parents to do to help bring about the desired behaviors?
3. What are you, the teacher, willing to do to bring about the desired behavioral changes?

IV. Decide on a Conferencing Strategy

A. How much information do the parents already have about the problem?

B. How do you think the parents will behave during the conference?

C. How do you think the parents feel about the conference?

V. Rehearse Your Conferencing Techniques

A. What would I say if . . .?

STAGE II: CONFERENCING

STAGE III: QUESTIONS WHICH FACILITATE SELF-EVALUATION

I. Process Evaluation

A. How well did you follow the conference plan as outlined at Stage 1?

B. To what extent were you able to anticipate the feelings and behaviors of the parents?

C. How effective was the conferencing strategy you developed?

II. Product Evaluation

A. To what extent were you able to communicate your concerns (in each problem area) to the parents?

B. How successful were you in formulating a mutually satisfacotry plan of action?

C. What did you learn about yourself as a person from analyzing your own feelings?

D. How can you improve your conferencing from what you learned about yourself during your interaction with the parents?

Appendix B

SIMULATION RATING SHEET

All of the behaviors below will be rated using the following scale:

1. behavior occurs little or none of the time
2. behavior occurs some of the time
3. behavior occurs most or all of the time

ATTENDING:

_____Teacher positions parents away from distractions.

_____Teacher sits comfortably, leaning slightly toward parents.

_____Teacher faces parents squarely.

_____Teacher maintains eye contact.

RESPONDING:

_____Teacher restates content of parents' statement.

_____Teacher tentatively labels the feeling of parents.

_____Teacher does not judge or label parents.

_____Teacher focuses on parents rather than on other things or people.

INITIATING:

_____Teacher summarizes content of several parent statements.

_____Teacher summarizes feeling of statements.

_____Teacher confronts parents with differences.

COMMUNICATING:

_____Teacher and parents identify different courses of action.

_____Consequences or outcomes of actions are mutually explored.

_____Teacher and parents agree on plan of action.

_____Teacher relates parent feelings about conference.

Appendix C

ATTENDING

The purpose of Attending behaviors is to let parents know that they are the focus of your attention; that you are really interested in what is going on. Attending is done at both the non-verbal (body language) and verbal (minimal encourage) levels.

Non-verbal (body langauge)

1. Locate your body to screen parents from distracting sights and sound.
2. Face the parents squarely with head and body.
3. Lean slightly toward the parents but maintain a relaxed position; try several body postures to see which one is most comfortable for you.
4. Maintain eye contact, but don't stare.
5. Head nodding--often this is an almost unconscious action when you're listening intently; it doesn't necessarily indicate agreement with what is being said, but indicates that you are following the speaker and wish them to continue.

Verbal (minimal encourage: brief utterances that show parents that you have "tuned in" to them)

1. "Oh?" "So?" "Then?" "And?"
2. The repetition of one or two key words.
3. "Tell me more."

4. Simple restatement of the exact words of the parents' last statement.
5. SILENCE You need to give parents time to respond; time to think. This is an especially difficult technique for teachers since in front of a classroom, continued discussion is very important; but in parent-teacher conferences, silence can be one of the most important techniques to practice.

Appendix D

RESPONDING

The purpose of responding is to give back to the parents the gist of what has been said (or what you heard them saying). There are basically two types of responses: Interchangeable and Subtractive. An Interchangeable response tentatively labels the emotion and content of what a parent has said. What the talker is saying is the content portion of the message. How the talker gives the message (speed or vocal tone, facial expressions) as well as feeling words which the talker uses communicates how he/she is feeling. Subtractive responses shift the focus to things or people external to the discussion or such a response imposes the teacher's value system through judgement or criticism. One way to practice making interchangeable responses is to use the model "You feel (some feeling word like happy, sad) because (the reason the parent has stated or content).

Another way of responding is to use questions. There are also two types of questions: Open-ended and Closed-ended. An open-ended question generally leads to a willingness to respond; a close-ended question shuts down communication. "Have you stopped beating your wife?" is a good example of a closed-ended question. If he says "Yes" he is in effect saying he did it in the past; if he says "No" he is doing it both then and now. This type of question

generally puts someone else in the "one-down" defensive position. On the other hand, an open-ended question leads to further communication and doesn't cause the parent to feel defensive.

Here are a few examples of parent statements demonstrating the difference between a closed- and open-ended question:

Parent: So I'm wondering just what to do; I'm afraid I just don't know the answer; I seem to bungle everything.

Open: Could you tell me some more about "bungling everything?"

Closed: Why do you feel that way?

Parent: How come schools don't make kids learn anything?

Open: What kinds of things do you want them to learn?

Closed: Why on earth would you think that?

As a rule-of-thumb, questions that begin with "could," "what," or "how" tend to be more open-ended; often a "why" question is hard to answer and puts the parent on the defensive.

Appendix E

RESPONSE WORKSHEET

DIRECTIONS: Please mark each teacher response as being either Interchangeable (I) or Subtractive (S).

1. Parent: I'm not sure I've helped Gary since I work and have so little time at home.

_____Teacher: I think quality of time is more important than quantity.

_____Teacher: The time pressure makes you feel doubtful about how effective you are as a parent.

2. Parent: I'm terribly concerned about Jane's trouble in math. I don't know how to help.

_____Teacher: Why don't you buy her a calculator?

_____Teacher: Jane's math problems are upsetting to you.

3. Parent: I don't know if I should keep her in this school or check into private schools; she may even need to see a psychologist.

_____Teacher: You feel its a hard decision.

_____Teacher: You're confused about which alternative is best.

4. You haven't done anything for my Fred this year. Why last year he just did so well in school. You just don't like him, that's his only problem.

_____Teacher: You feel as though I haven't done enough.

_____Teacher: You think I don't like Fred and that makes you upset.

Appendix F

INITIATING

The purpose of initiating behavior is to draw together the common themes (both content and feeling) of the entire conference; to condense, recapitulate and crystalize what has been said. Like all human beings, we bring with us as listeners our own value system, experience and knowledge. Since all of these things can influence (distort) what we hear and see, we may be inaccurate in our perception of another's communication. By using summarization, we can check out our perceptions with parents to see how accurate we are in what we've seen or heard. Another purpose of initiating behavior is to help the parent recognize differences in what they have been saying. This kind of "confronting" is not done judgmentally or critically. The attitude is not one of "Ah, Ha! I caught you saying one thing one time and something else later;" rather is is one of simply pointing out the discrepancies in the communication so that the parent is aware of them. When summarization is accurate, it can help move the conference from discussion to action and problem solving.

Appendix G

COMMUNICATING

The purpose of Communicating behaviors is to explore alternative ways of solving the problem. As the teacher, you probably already have a plan in mind or a set of alternatives. However, it is often helpful to "brainstorm" with the parents for they bring with them a broader range of experiences with the student. Thus it is often beneficial for the teacher and parents to explore different courses of action and evaluate the possible outcomes of each alternative so that a mutually satisfactory solution can be reached. Since the parents have been treated as human beings capable of making decisions and since they have had a chance to make input into the final solution, they are much more likely to help see that the plan or course of action is implemented.